

Public Memory in Early China. By K. E. Brashier. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014. Pp. viii + 511. \$69.95/£51.95.

Public Memory in Early China represents the second instalment of Kenneth Brashier's wide-ranging study of early Chinese religion and culture. The first instalment, published in 2011, explored the ancestral cult.¹ The subject of the second is different. It investigates the memorial culture of the Han, or what he calls "public memory." More specifically, his study sheds light on the ways in which name, age, and kinship functioned to insert people into Han memorial culture (p. 57). Towards this end, he marshals an impressive volume of sources, ranging from bronze inscriptions and the *Songs canon* of the late Western Zhou (c. 1046–771 B.C.), the masters' literature of the Warring States period (c. 453–221 B.C.), the legal and administrative documents of Qin (221–206 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), and the eulogies carved onto stone. The result of this wide-ranging and ambitious study is a "thick description" of Han memorial culture and its broader cultural, intellectual, and religious milieu.

The introduction opens by offering the reader with an orientation of Han memorial culture. It provides a detailed survey of early manuscript culture: the practices of social organization and institutions that undergirded the transmission, memorization, and recitation of texts.

The first three parts of the book treat the building blocks of Han memorial culture. Part I demonstrates how names positioned the self in early China; it delves into the intricacies of ancient naming practices, providing the clearest English-language exposition in print on the tabooed, courtesy, and posthumous names. Here, Brashier contrasts the early Chinese function of names with their Western counterparts. Whereas Western names work to individuate a person, ancient Chinese names, in contrast, serve the opposite purpose: they "tended to relativize the bearer" (p. 91). For example, Brashier shows that the early Chinese named small children in order to *incorporate* or introduce them into a lineage (pp. 69–70). Similarly, the courtesy name, acquired around the time of puberty, signalled a person's "physical ability to continue that lineage" (p. 77). Part II carries forward the discussion found in the previous section, extending the ruminations on time by delving into the ways in which age worked to anchor an individual in Han memorial culture. Once again, Brashier finds it useful to contrast early Chinese understandings of age with those found in the West. Through an investigation of Chinese law and imperial policy, he finds substantial differences. He argues that Westerners conceived of age in terms

¹ *Ancestral Memory in Early China* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

of an arc of vigour and physical strength, as exemplified by the “Ages of Man” iconography. In contrast, the early Chinese, as seen in court policy and culture, venerated old age, a veneration seen in the early Han system of conferring ranks of nobility. Blanket conferrals on the part of the court meant that elder members of Han society were more likely to be higher on the ladder of honours than its younger and more rigorous members. For Brashier, the discrepancies between Chinese and Western views of old age owe much to basic differences in conceptions of selfhood: Westerners tend to see individuals in terms of discrete units, bounded and delineated by the material body, whereas the ancient Chinese understood selfhood in relational terms. Or, as Brashier eloquently puts it, “If the self is less a discrete, bordered, competing individual and more like a knot on a relationship net defined through association, then that self would indeed be more divorced from personal physical circumstances and be more a product of its community and its accumulating ties to others” (pp. 80–81). Part III brings together many of the themes found in the first two and represents a logical extension of his previous section on names and age: the place of kinship in defining selfhood within Han memorial culture. As he puts it, “Kinship thus joins name and age as an orientational tool in the public memory. Your name, your age, and your kinship said something about you in early China, positioning you relative to everyone else within the collective imagination” (p. 262). Here, he provides further texture to the idea of the Han self as a “matrixed persona,” one that transcended the material body. He shows the ways in which this “knot-like” conception of the self manifested itself in the various aspects of ancestral cult and physical venues, from ancestral altars to grave mounds to an individual’s body.

The first three parts investigate the building blocks of Han memorial culture—conceptions of name, age, and kinship. In contrast, the fourth and fifth parts explore the tangible and intangible tools used to construct public memory out of the conceptual resources discussed in earlier sections. These tangible tools include calling cards left at funerals, ancestral shrines and tablets, bronze vessels, alcohol and meat offerings, musical and dance performances, cemeteries, portraits of the deceased, and stelae. According to Brashier, all of the tangible tools functioned not only to give presence to the absent dead but also to remould the dead in terms of communal values (p. 267). The intangible tools represented the schemas, archetypes, and patterns, and they worked to *reduce* an individual to stock images and classical paragons.

There is much to praise in Brashier’s study—for example, its ambitious scope and wide-ranging use of sources, the richness of its detail, its breathtaking erudition and engagement with a wide range of scholars, and its comparative insights. In this last regard, Brashier deserves considerable credit. In recent years, many practitioners of the early China field have shied away from cross-cultural comparisons, the *bête-noire* of graduate seminars and the whipping dog of anti-essentialist crusaders. In

fact, many of us have come to see comparisons as odious (though all of us engage in them to some degree, whether explicitly or implicitly). Certainly, some readers will be surprised about the sweeping conclusions regarding the differences in mentality between China and “the West”—for example, as seen in Brashier’s comparison of notions of time in ancient China and the West. However, I found the unabashedly comparative dimension of Brashier’s refreshing. It stimulated me to think harder about the term *public memory*—a key concept that Brashier left undefined. Yet Brashier’s comparative scope begs the question about the extent to which one should apply the label “public memory” to stelae and other forms of memorial culture. And, if so, how did Han expressions of public memory differ from those found, for example, in the Hellenistic world?

In closing, allow me to venture a few preliminary thoughts on the subject. In many ways, applying the label “public” to memorial stelae makes a certain degree of sense. Found alongside roads, in front of temples and tombs, and on the faces of bridges and sides of mountains, such monuments were designed by its makers to be seen, sung, and memorized by members of the population, as well as future administrators and travellers. As I have argued elsewhere, such monuments also played a role in shaping the buzz or reputational capital of living officials and their kinsmen.² In this sense, one may think of the tangible tools—like the intangible archetypes and schema—as being in the *communal* domain. Yet it is worth asking whether this form of communal expression actually resembles that of the Hellenistic world. In this regard, it would be worth contrasting the memorial stelae of Han to the honorific portraits found in the Hellenistic city-states, recently studied by John Ma.³ Like the Han memorial stelae, these portraits came with extended inscriptions, which related the complex careers of notable individuals, reducing them into exemplary patterns and archetypes. Indeed, Ma’s description of serialization offers striking parallels to the Han case. Like Han inscriptions, Hellenistic statues stripped the honorand of any individuality in an effort to assert the communal values and priority of the polis. As with Han memorial stelae, these inscriptions were commissioned by local notables, and often for outsiders: the Roman governors and foreign kings, who were also imposed upon the Hellenistic city-states by an imperial power.⁴

² Miranda Brown, “Returning the Gaze: An Experiment in Reviving Gu Yanwu (1613–1682),” *Fragments: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Ancient and Medieval Pasts* 1 (2011), pp. 41–77; Miranda Brown and Yu Xie, “Between Heaven and Earth: Dual Accountability in Han China,” *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 1 (2015), pp. 56–87.

³ John Ma, *Statues and Cities: Honorific Portraits and Civic Identity in the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

The comparison with the honorific portraits, however, forces us to think harder about the use of *public* or *public* memory in the Han context. Like Brashier, Ma is wary of reductive definitions, being aware of the pitfalls of drawing too stark a distinction between public and private. Still, Ma nevertheless distinguishes between the honorific portraits commissioned and (partially) financed by the polis, on the one hand, and those set up entirely on the initiative of individuals, working outside of the context of civic institutions, on the other. As Ma points out, those portraits commissioned by the polis were subject to the regulation of civic institutions, which not only determined the allocation of public funds, but also the location of honorary statues (i.e., in the agora, gymnasium, and other civic spaces). We know that in a handful of cases that the Han memorial stelae were commissioned by the court. But this appears to have been in the minority of cases. Officials, former officials, local notables, and members of the family would pool resources to commission and erect a stele. There is furthermore scant evidence that such projects ran across much official interference in the Han (a situation different from that of late imperial China). Nor is there evidence that there was an official institution comparable to the *statue commission* in the Hellenistic city-state, one that would underwrite and approve monuments honouring local benefactors or imperial administrators. Seen from this perspective, the memorial stelae of Han were far more *grassroots*, to use Brashier's turn of phrase, than the honorary statues. Insofar as they may be seen as part of public memory, the Han memorial stelae were public in a substantially different way from their counterparts in the Hellenistic world.

In my view, the success of this book lies not in winning the reader's assent as much as forcing her to think: challenging her to reconsider categories and opening up new lines of scholarly inquiry.

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